adidas

SHIRT (S)

SHIRT is a rapper and conceptual artist based in Queens. His unique and prolific practice finds commonality in hip-hop and contemporary art through ideas of sampling and appropriation. The two seemingly disparate disciplines become intertwined in SHIRT's universe, mixing in additional elements of sculpture, performance, and fashion. But to the artist, these distinctions are irrelevant, all of them are really just containers for his ideas. In one work, SHIRT created a fake version of *The New York Times* for an album release; in another he broke the internet with a shirt sporting both Nike and Adidas logos. In a personal favorite, he restaged the iconic 1983 *Blizaard Ball Sale* where he sold snowballs on the street in New York to create a shared experience with the artist David Hammons. As SHIRT concludes in the interview, bootlegging is very much about "extending"—it's the natural evolution of an idea when it enters the world. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS)

BS: What is your relationship to bootlegging, even outside of your art practice? Growing up, did you have any interaction with bootlegs or any formative experiences

with them? Do you think about bootlegging when making work?

S: I probably first heard the word in the context of buying mixtapes and CDs from DJs. I grew up listening to hip-hop music very closely, so sampling is part of the language you learn there. Is sampling bootlegging? Is taking a part of something to conceptually or actually use it for a new thing, bootlegging it? I don't know, maybe not. Are we not speaking here to the very nature of what we do as human beings and how we live? To take, absorb, and evolve? Everything is remixed. Maybe we get a thing right and hold on to it for a long while, but even then there has to be people somewhere fucking with it, trying things, pushing the limits of a thing, expanding a thing. Is expounding on a thing bootlegging it? Bastardizing it? Honoring it? I like the idea of walking near someone having a conversation, thinking you heard them say one thing, then riffing on what you think you heard. It will always be something new but derivative. All the while, other people in your vicinity are doing exactly the same thing. We learn from and bootleg each other, right? Is learning bootlegging? We learn how to live and how to die from each other. I watch you, I try that thing I like, now I'm doing it and someone's watching me. I don't think about this concept of bootlegging when making work. I'm thinking about the work.

BS: Could you talk more about the relationship between bootlegging and hip-hop? Is there a difference between bootlegging and sampling, and is it even important to make that distinction?

S: Yeah, like I was saying, maybe there isn't a real difference. But it'll depend on the context, too. In actual definitions there's a distinction, sure. Typically "bootlegging" is referring to making a new thing 1:1 to the original thing, right? Or it's even often considered a lesser quality version of the original thing. Then also bootlegging as a term has ties to being deceitful and trying to create a deceiving "fake" or counterfeit. Sampling is often referring to taking a small piece of something and using that to make something new. So sampling two seconds of an old hit record to use for a loop through a new song. Or sampling as in trying a piece of something. They're different concepts, yeah. In general, to be honest, I don't like the term and its connotation. I have problems with what gets referred to as a bootleg and what never does. Jimmy Fallon or some other massive pop force will outright steal little Black girl dances on TikTok that go viral all the time but the skits are never referred to as bootlegs. Corporations will always attempt to copy what goes viral, record labels will try to apply the same formula over and over again, any company doing anything will attempt to duplicate what works. Sometimes we fail and it's noticeable. Often the copy is so perfect it works and goes unnoticed. I say "we" because it strikes me as human nature. We're all just trying to bootleg our best days.

> BS: Bootlegging finds its origins in smuggling. Today I think about bootlegging as a way to smuggle ideas back and forth between realms of "high" and "low" culture (as much as I hate those terms). I love the way your work seamlessly moves between hip-hop, historically viewed as pop culture,

and contemporary art, traditionally understood as "high culture." Can you talk about how you work with, and often upend these archaic distinctions? How does this relate to ideas of rebellion or infiltration?

S: We have to stop referring to it as high/low. Bootlegging as a way to smuggle ideas back and forth—period. I willfully ignore these lines and distinctions now. I don't acknowledge them. I am constantly being reminded that they are there in the minds of pretty much every person in the world, but I personally have done a good job operating like the lines do not exist at all. I just make. The idea, and thinking about the idea, dictates the medium the thing ends up in.

Something I've been thinking recently is that maybe there is no bad art but only sentiments expressed in a wrong medium. Like not enough thought was put into what medium would be best, or an idea was forced through a medium by either the artist or a third party. When you think about most instances of what we may consider "bad art," usually the feeling and desire in making the thing is coming from a very genuine place in a person—like the old adage says, "No one has ever written, painted, sculpted, modeled, built, or invented except literally to get out of hell." I do believe that to a large degree. But I don't think about "infiltration" all that much. It's a cool word and idea maybe. But for instance, I find myself in crazy rooms sometimes and might marvel at how I ended up there, marvel at this connection or that. But I don't feel this infiltration thing. I'm supposed to be in that room.

The path I'm on will lead me through all sorts of rooms. If I was an international spy or something,

we could talk about the infiltration thing, but I'm not. "Rebellion" is there, but it's more acutely a rebellion against letting a bullshit, racist, inequitable, deeply harsh world dictate how I'm going to personally move through it and approach people and things. I rebel against anyone attempting to dim my flame. I burn hotter in the face of that.

> BS: You're often making art about, or in reference to, other artists, which to me is an expression of fandom. Bootlegging as a fan becomes an act of love. Do you consider yourself a fan? In what ways does this fandom motivate or inspire you? Alternatively, do you use bootlegging as a form of critique?

S: To be honest, I rarely make art "about other artists." I actually can't think of a work I've made specifically about another artist. What happens is I will often come across a work by another artist that I feel is really just perfectly said or done. And then sometimes the idea for me is to do it exactly like they did. My ongoing Neon Book Paintings Series comes to mind, where I read a book for the first time and highlight sentences with a neon marker that stand out to me—and then that is the work itself. Part of that is a feeling like I don't have to or want to add one other thing there. This sentence or idea is worded just right and it's exactly what I myself want to communicate, so I highlight, and in that way I've used it.

It more than often has nothing to do with whoever I saw do it first. Just like I want it not to matter that the next kid might have seen me do it first. Maybe it should be about what the work is saying and only that. For me, it's all in service of whatever larg-

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er idea I've come to in my practice. So I think the concept of "fan" here is weird. Art and thinking critically has saved my life and in many ways has changed how I approach nearly everything. Is sharing stuff I find inspiring inherently an act of love? Yeah maybe. I know, there's always gonna be people who see stuff you post for the first time and it becomes this universe opening thing. I'm aware of that. Is positively wanting to expand someone's world an act of love? Probably yeah. Of course, I really am a fan of people. I'm a fan of works and ideas and where being open can lead. I'm motivated to learn and to teach. That's what it is to be alive for me. Constant learning and teaching. Whatever you learn should be taught. Could someone use a mode of "bootlegging" as a way to express ideas of critique too? Sure.

> BS: I want to talk about your performance reenactments... Hammons's *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, your performance of *The Fine Art of Rap* (I know this is a little different than a direct reenactment, but I was really moved by the video) or recreating the sidewalk writing image from the NYPL Image Collection to name a few. I understand this as an embodied form of bootlegging—a copy that involves becoming the original. When you do these performances, how does your relationship with the original change?

S: Yeah it's totally an embodying thing. For me, doing something physically exactly the same as someone else did it is kind of this beautiful collapsing of time and

p. 292: SHIRT, *Neon Book Paintings* (ongoing)

space, a gesture I've come to really like. Maybe it grew out of skating when I was young, trying to emulate tricks I saw and new moves. But yeah, where does it come from? It's a way of being close to a particular person, work, or action, right? And yeah again, you hope that the way the original thing moved you or helped you, in some way in turn does that for someone else. By redoing it you're expanding its reach.

I'm not sure how my relationship to the original thing changes. Does it give me this new insight? Maybe. I remember going to the Matisse Cut-Out show at MoMa in 2014 and wanting to make those Blue Nude shapes out of paper. Then when I did and was making them, I felt the scissors slicing through the paper and there was something there. Matisse himself felt that sensation. Our arms had to bend and contort the same way to get those angles. That's something. Same for the Hammons work. Maybe seeing the gorgeous Dawoud Bey photo you think a guy is just standing out there selling snowballs. But then you do it: you prepare the snowballs, choose the rug, you go out and stand there and people walk by and interact with you. Me and Hammons share that now. It may have been a different day or whatever, some 30+ years apart, but it's a New York City street and people are walking by and you feel this magical connection.

But also this "becoming the original" thing you said. Is that not what we're all doing? We start out as bootlegs or samples of our parents and then living is the process of becoming, right? What happens when you do what heroes do? Do you not become a hero in the process? Do you not become someone else's hero? I look up to people and have always

pp. 294–295: SHIRT, *Snowball Sale (1983)* (2018)

thought, well, to have certain qualities I admire in others, you emulate them. The thing about emulating is it's only emulating conceptually before you do it. Once you do it, maybe it's not emulating anymore. You're just doing it now. I've been trying to be like and emulate and bootleg and learn from smart, caring, thoughtful, fly, ill people for a long time.

> BS: You remade a Virgil Abloh shirt titled *You Can Copy Someone To A T And It Will Never Be The Same*. To you, what is the value of a copy?

S: Yeah, I kept seeing Virgil wearing it and couldn't find any info on it anywhere. I would make up fantastical ideas of where he came to get or make it, what the graphic specifically referenced and his interpretation of it all. It made me think. But I think it's important here to distinguish that before I thought about this as a copy, I thought about it as: it is this black tee with a large white ship graphic on the front, et cetera. We don't experience things as a "copy" even if we know they are. We first and foremost experience them as they are. And that maybe is an inherent value in what a copy is. It is itself a new experience that stands alone and never has to refer to the original. I think I've tapped into some truth there, I've never put it into language until just now. Maybe all we're seeing is "copies" everywhere we look. Only we experience these things as their own original thing. So we have to remember that! Copying as worldmaking. And connecting that to the same positive feeling you get from executing an idea or a dream you want to make reality. I thought that tee should exist. I had

YOU ACTUALLY
FELL IN LOVE
WITH AN IMAGE

to prepare a high quality file from jpegs I found online, then invest a bit of money to make and produce the tees. It's always inspiring as hell to go through that process and end up on the other side with a thing you made. It's gratifying as shit every time, as anyone that does it will attest. Then this person—Virgil in this case, a hero of heroes—dies young. So I never get to give him one, we never get to talk about why it struck me as important, how he came to have it et cetera.

> BS: I want to expand on that project a bit, specifically the way you sent around files allowing people to remake the shirts themselves. I'm really interested in the way you approach distribution, often offering links to tracks, or files on your Instagram. In what ways does bootlegging create or reinforce community? How has that worked in your own practice?

S: Anything you put up public on a social media site should attract people that like the same thing. Does liking some of the same things make us a community? I don't know. I do think it's inevitable that humans clique up. I don't think bootlegging is intrinsically linked to how maybe you're defining community. Or maybe it is and I just don't know the inner workings of some bootlegging community. I really like this idea that maybe we don't experience the concept of a bootleg at all. Maybe a good bootleg means the concept of a bootleg immediately fades and you're really just left

p. 298: SHIRT, *You Can Copy Someone To A T (It Will Never Be The Same)* (2021)

with the thing. Maybe the same thing the original produced. So yeah, a few hundred of us experience a thing on socials as we encounter it and we might clique up around it. Community comes into play with being exposed to others' opinions for a prolonged time. I also don't know how I feel about the word community anymore either. I feel very close to certain people for sure, and in conversation with them whether physically and actually or not. You meet people from around the world and it's instant love. So what are the lines of this community if not jagged and raw and glitchy and shifting. I like thinking that people in my IG comments or interacting with my stuff at the same time, downloading from links I make available etc, are finding each other too. I really hope that's actually happening.

> BS: Could you talk about the way you use logos in your work? What meaning do these signs hold for you? I'm thinking specifically of your Adidas × Nike mashups and Nike × Timberland mashups.

S: I don't have a particular way I use logos in my work. In fact, I feel a bit of indifference when it comes to logos. I flirted with having various logos when I was younger, but as my work and career developed I've purposely not established a logo for my own brands. I mean, I have what an invoice looks like from me. I have fonts I like, I guess. But there isn't that one symbol, or rather there's a bunch. When it comes to putting a Nike check on a Timberland boot, for me it's about gesture. The physical gesture of taking a silver Krink and doing specifically this dripping check. The colors are too good together, the materials, that iridescent paint on the

suede. The gesture isn't to stand there and write small words on the boot and sentences—that's maybe a different idea for another time. This was about that physical check gesture. It was almost just a bonus that the check mark is a logo for a really popular company, and one that for me there's some history with. So there was all this other meaning able to be layered on to what was initially a really just gestural, and pure motion and desire for the boots customized in this way. I have to say there was also some success I was feeling because growing up, the yellow Timberland was so iconic I used to think all collaborations done with it were corny. As a designer and creative, it becomes a real goal to make a thing like that work. The yellow construction boot is just about untouchable to me, but something about that silver dripping Nike check on the side of it made me feel like I achieved something. (I have one other really good idea.) People reducing all of that to their simple idea of a "bootleg" is so old and played out to me. It's a 6 inch premium Timberland boot with this added paint element from an artist. "Bootleg" damn near has nothing to do with it. I'll say that I do think there's a lot of power in people appropriating corporate logos and imagery and anything else to create commentary, capital, et cetera. There should be absolutely nothing off limits for people to use. The rich already operate like this. Especially if we're talking "legal" limits and bullshit like copyright.

BS: On a related note, what is your relationship to ownership and originality?

S: My relationship to the terms is that they are clearly very real concepts for a lot of people and I believe

come from a very human place. I can imagine a lot of people throughout history dying over feeling like someone copied them or took their idea. I can also easily imagine many of the brilliant ideas we live by now and attribute to certain individuals may as well be bootlegged, remixed, stolen, and otherwise interpreted from someone we'll never know the name of. I think it's caused a lot of strife between people and continues to today. I personally think it's all nonsense. I mean, play by the rules too, right? You can't just come take my car. That's my car, right? I'm wearing a jacket, you couldn't just come take my jacket off me. I mean, you could. That's the thing, too. We can say something is ours all we want, but is it?

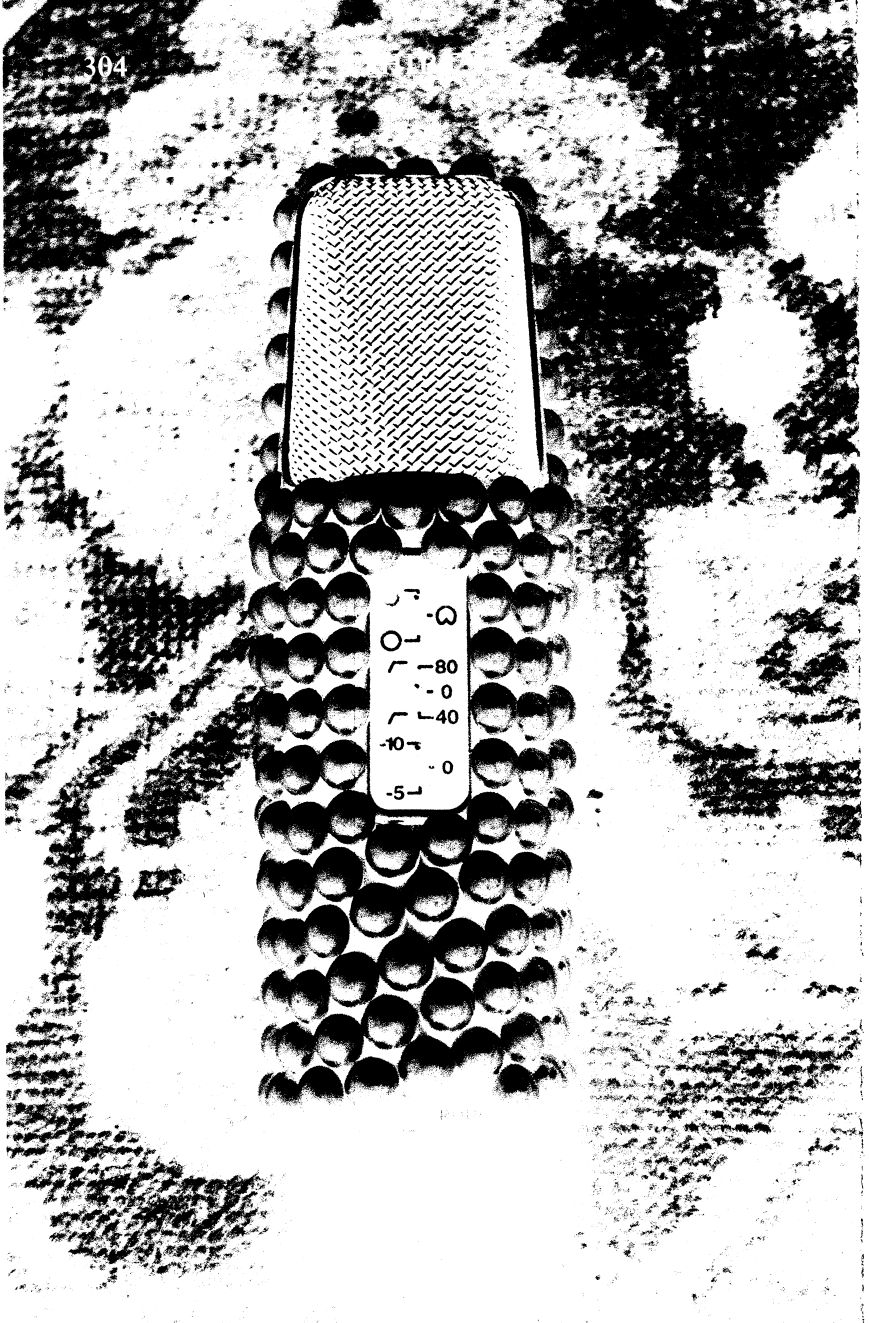
As far as originality goes, I think we are all co-conspirators of each other. If we're talking as me and you are, then this is our era together. Everyone posting on their Instagram and Twitter their ideas and who they are. I don't know what originality is supposed to mean. I'm original in the sense that my DNA is mine, sure. I'm me, there literally isn't a clone of me. I don't care about originality, like—how could I lose when I'm already chose? I am original no matter what or who I copy or what I do. No one on earth could copy like me, and I can't copy like anyone else. What I'm saying is, in a deep sense, we all are already copying each other. That's how we know to wear pants and take the train and stand there and drive in the lines. I think a cooler game to play is who can find and follow and copy the best people and ideas. Like where's an idea from hundred years ago—or yesterday—that interests me to extend it and keep it going? Who's a person I can find that I feel just fucking gets it, that I can watch as much as they allow and my time here allows. What can

come through them? Who are the best people and ideas on their radar? And then of course, your own metric for "best" comes into play. Best for me in this sense is just a loose best and brightest/seems like a good person/ stylish/aware of what's going on/ loving.

> BS: I think the recent work you are doing with pearls is really beautiful. I see it as enshrining something that is overlooked. I think of bootlegging as a form of preservation especially in underrepresented communities. Does this idea resonates with you?

S: I think if we look at what Dapper Dan was doing and all the racism and barriers of entry he was met with and so many others are met with—it becomes more than about preservation. It becomes about doing what you gotta and using what you got. Dap and none of us can compete with these brands spending hundreds of millions, and billions now, to market and sell to our people or anyone who wants that logo on their chest. So what if we just take that logo and do what we want with it? Imagine that. They spend billions to make their symbol so cool that my people work and give all their money to advertise it on their chest, and I can't use it too? All a company logo is to me is another symbol made for me to exploit. We can all exploit. And Dap made original things everyday! No one did it like Dapper Dan. Other people did it like them even when they thought they were doing it like him—see how that works?

Do we understand how aggressive it is to be some Forbes 500 company and buy billboards in neighborhoods and around cities with your logo printed on it? All just to sell to the inhabitants of that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city and community? It's insane and we've normalized it. And we know the word "bootlegging" but we don't know the word—I don't have the word. What's a word for companies and brands that advertise their products and ideas in neighborhoods that the company's executives and employees don't live in?

How about all a "real" product should mean is made by a person. All "authentic" should be referring to is the type of experience you're going to get. You're not going to get your forty bucks stolen—you're going to buy and receive a T-shirt, it's gonna be a size large, it's gonna be a black tee, et cetera. My Nike Adidas tees aren't bootlegs of anything. That was my whole point, I had never seen the logos just together on a tee like that. I saw people doing things like different words in the same font and shit like that, but never just the logos unaltered next to each other. This is me after I grew up hearing my whole life that it's this taboo thing to wear the two companies at the same time. Like they have some power over me. So I'm a person examining all of our learned bullshit, and I'm going to let that sit with me and not react? No. So in this case I made a tee about it.

"Bootlegging" is just extending. It's exactly what would happen when an idea becomes public or hits the mainstream. If it's a decent idea it can and most often will be adopted, copied and multiplied, and become the invisible normal. It can and does disappear into our psyche. Are the ripples in a body of water bootlegs of previous ripples? Sometimes I make beats repeating sounds I make accidentally.

p. 304: SHIRT, *I Turned Myself Into Myself* (2022), album cover
Title page (p. 286): Nike and Adidas logo referencing a T-shirt made by SHIRT featuring both logos